



## ***Behind the Grease Paint: A Clown's Chronicle in Vietnam***

*by Jed Selter \Duffy the Clown*

"When I traveled to Vietnam in Feb-March 2001 to clown with *Kids First*, I wrote my impressions into a set of 38 verses, and decided to publish them to raise money for *Kids First*. - a non profit group in Washington State which raises money to help orphaned children, maimed by land mines, and disfigured from the effects of Agent Orange.

"This book is very close to me. It is an outpouring of my thoughts and my emotions from being immersed in another culture and seeing the lasting tragedies from war. It is also my observations of the connection among people, and of special people who care for and who extend themselves to dramatically help others."

. . . . . *excerpts*

### ***Returning***

February 2001. . .  
The plane was preparing to land in what  
he knew then as Saigon,  
Now Ho Chi Minh City.

It was a quiet effortless approach  
Into a well manicured international  
airport.

He recalled an earlier time,  
An empty pit forming in his stomach.

February 1969...  
Bile in his throat,  
Trying to hide his shaking from fear  
And the feeling of foreboding.

Thup, thup, thup thup . . .  
The blades of the helicopter gun ship  
above him, keeping him aloft,  
Out of harms way.

Thup, thup, thup, thup . . .  
He fought to stay focused,  
His hands steadying the mounted  
gattling gun at the open bay door,  
Pointed toward the jungle below.

Afraid he would see rustling greenery-  
movement below,  
And have to shoot to stop it.  
To kill the faceless enemy in the brush.  
No- admit it. Say it . . .  
Another Human Being.

Later, he would relive it.  
Over and over for a dark eternity.  
Every night for the rest of his life.

Drenched in sweat,  
Sleepless nights.  
Safe at home, but unable to speak it,  
His shame, his pain from it years  
earlier.  
His unending private grief.

Then, a young man decorated for  
his gallantry in war, under fire.  
Now, years later, in bed with his wife  
beside him asleep,  
Trying to hide his sobbings in his  
pillow.  
Whimpering.

Thup, thup, thup, thup . . .  
Nothing gallant preparing to kill from  
two hundred feet in the air.  
Or for that matter, from anywhere.

Who would, who could forgive him?

It was survival.  
It was organized war,  
He just an insignificant in the middle.

He just obeyed orders,  
And for that,  
Haunted for his life.

He lived through it (somehow).  
He came home.  
He was ashamed.

Now he returns,  
Trying to right wrongs of thirty  
two years ago.

Hoping for some peace of mind.



### ***The Last Show***

Our last night in Vietnam.  
Hanoi.

Our last meal as a group.  
Thank yous and impromptu comments,  
A celebration of a new group  
Coalesced in two weeks.

Afterwards, Rags (our group  
photographer), Safari and I  
To the little boot shop to pick up  
our custom made clown shoes.  
Not quite done.

The boot maker worked, the rest of us  
in a circle on the floor,  
Three generations of family,  
Boot maker off to the side,  
sewing our shoes.

We sat two hours on small stools  
in this tiny street front shop.

No costumes,  
No grease paint.  
Just balloons and laughter.  
And one red nose.

We spoke no intelligible words,  
None of them English.  
We no Vietnamese.

But, how we communicated!

Grandpa, Grandma,  
Sons, wives, daughters,  
And seven children.

Twelve of us packed into  
this little shop.

That red nose flew from face to face,  
And each time it landed,  
A new funny look mimed by the  
wearer to us all.  
Around and around it went.

Balloons sprung up in various shapes.  
A hat for Grandpa,  
A flower for a little daughter,  
A sword for a little grandson.

Then, motions of announcement.  
Shoes were done!

Placed on my feet,  
Modeled for the "crowd."

I bowed to the boot maker,  
He the same in return.

Claps and howls from the group,  
us all still on the floor.

Then, like the nose,  
The shoes made the rounds.

The littlest ones got lost in the red and  
blue leather,  
Stood, wobbled, fell over and laughed.

Grandma in these huge shoes  
and red nose,  
Posed for pictures.

Thank *yous* to all,  
Hugs and kisses.

A fitting last show.



### ***The Flight To Hue***

We left early on day Five for a one hour  
flight from Saigon to Hue.

Organized chaos to the airport.  
More luggage for twenty seven people  
than for an entire army.

Scrambling to get organized,  
Then waiting on long lines to check-in,  
Then rushing to the gate.

Finally aboard and seated.

I was sweaty and uncomfortable,  
Cramped shoulder to shoulder between  
two others.  
The dreaded center seat.

The cold sandwich in front of me,  
Unappetizing, as hungry as I was.

I sat and shut out these temporary  
circumstances,  
Instead, reflecting on our journey so far,  
Not even a week old.

My eyes wide open, but my head in  
another dimension.

I thought of the people we were and  
the people we had met.  
I relived the connections we have  
charged,  
And felt them all over, again.

I visualized changed lives  
Because of our presence in these  
moments.

I cried softly,  
Grateful for this.  
Exhausted and exhilarated



### ***Oh, To Fly!***

*(February 22, 2001 –  
The Ground Breaking Ceremony  
of Friendship Village, Dong Ha  
sponsored by Peace Trees Vietnam)*

I am on the sidelines, just a spectator.  
Watching this ceremony.

This village will be home for people  
who can't afford much on their own.  
Those who are disadvantaged and  
coping with lasting challenges yet  
from "The Conflict."

Approximately one hundred homes for  
several hundred people.

Assembled under a large blue canopy  
shielding from the hot sun,  
Provincial officials, Peace Trees  
members, workers, villagers, US  
embassy people,  
others of us on lookers.

Listening to the speeches.  
Impassioned words.  
Visions of things better  
– to be in this village.

Vietnamese and Americans together  
pickup large decorated shovels.  
With ceremony, in unison they shovel  
the first clumps of earth toward  
rebuilding a community of lives  
through this village to be.

This is a moment in time,  
a nano-second in the continuum.  
But it is life changing for the people  
developing this village,  
For those who will call this place home,  
and  
For others of us on the fringes  
watching.

On the broad scale, projects like this  
are insignificant –  
And yet they are the most significant.

They are a testament to people's true  
nature,  
I believe, to want to care for others.  
Everything I see here are efforts to  
rebuild lives.

If you were not here, you missed this  
one.

I pray these things are happening as  
little bursts of Love and energy  
worldwide,  
But I am not sure there are enough of  
them.

I wish I could fly at light speed,  
Visiting these instances of human  
connections around the world as  
they happen.

I would harvest the intent, the  
dedication, the passion of people  
for people.  
I would seed them to grow forests of  
Love among us to blanket the earth.

Oh, I wish I could fly.



### ***Like A River's Path***

It is the end of our second day –  
Saigon.

We twenty seven have been doing  
different things,  
Some by themselves,  
Some in small groups.

But we are flowing in the same  
direction,  
Always.

The undercurrent is the focus to do The  
Greater Good,  
Each in our own way.

The hotel lobby is an island in our river  
At the crossing of our currents.  
The crossing of our individual journeys.

We stop for brief respites  
form the flow here.

But, already, it is more than just  
perfunctory "Hello's."

We meet.  
A hand caressing a shoulder,  
A pat on the back becoming a deeper  
caring touch.

To say I am comfortable with these  
"strangers"  
Is an understatement.

We are in the same flow of this river,  
Bank to bank.



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